



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Count the Stars”

Scripture – Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, February 21, 2016

When was the last time you saw the stars? And I mean *really* saw them ... When was the last time you were startled by the beauty of the night sky?

This is not something that happens very often on the east coast. It's not that we're not looking up. It's just that we've lost sight of the stars behind the pollution of urban life and city lights. But we've all gazed at the sky on a clear night, perhaps from the deck of a boat, or from a campsite, or from the rural road leading to a mountain retreat. We've all looked toward heaven and gazed at the stars, unfurled across the sky like a shimmering curtain.

I imagine this is what Abram saw when God directed his gaze toward the heavens. In an age before smog and light pollution, Abram would have looked up to see stars upon stars, shining across the expanse of desert sky. The sight must have filled him with wonder at the God who set these stars in the heavens, the God who now pointed to them and said: “So shall your descendents be.” The sight of these stars must have been enough to reassure this childless man, who was clinging to an impossible promise.

You see, at this point in the story, Abram – or Abraham, as he will later be called – has *heard* a lot about this promise. God first spoke to him in chapter twelve, saying: “Go ... to the Land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2-3). If we think about, it was an outlandish notion. Why would the God who created the cosmos now choose an elderly couple with no children to bear the blessing to the world? Abraham must have known how dubious this plan seemed ... He must have thought, if only for a second: *Really, God? You want us to leave everything behind on the off chance that you follow through?* But Abraham believed. He trusted that God would be faithful to this promise of land and descendants and blessing. So Abraham and Sarah packed up their life, said goodbye to family and friends, and set out for a foreign land.

Twenty-seven verses and – for Abraham and Sarah – *many miles* later, the Lord speaks again. “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth,” God says. “If one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted” (Gen 13:16). Again, we can imagine the silent response in Abraham's head: *Ok, God. You do know that Sarah is barren, right? Don't tell me you've sent us to Egypt and back again without doing your research!* But, again, Abraham trusts the promise. And he and Sarah press on in their journey with God.

And so we come to our text for today. When the word of the Lord comes to Abraham in this passage, he has already heard a lot about this promise. Abraham has trudged across miles and miles of unfamiliar terrain; he has pitched his tent in foreign lands, and moved on and pitched his tent again. And all the while, he must have been

marching to the silent refrain of the promise –Land. Descendants. Blessing. – Something to keep him going as he waited on God to act.

We've all been there. Maybe not physically – most of us have not lived as nomads in the Middle East. But most of us have waited on God to act.

We've waited on God during endless hours between the MRI and the test results, or as we watch the seconds tick by on the clock in the waiting room. We've waited on God as we hear about one more round of layoffs, and as we scroll through the job postings. We've waited on God to pull us out of grief, or to fulfill our deepest longings, or to respond to our prayers. We've waited for signs that God is at work in our lives, that God's promises are for us too.

In many ways, this is the posture of faith: Waiting. We wait and we watch – expectantly – for signs of the promise, for signs that God is faithful. This is how we navigate the journey through green pastures and dark valleys, sometimes trudging across miles and miles of unfamiliar terrain looking for a sign that God is with us. Signs are what fill the gaps between hearing about God's promise and seeing the promise realized. Signs are what must have sustained Abraham during the years between leaving his home in response to God's call and holding Isaac in his arms.

Waiting is not always easy, as Abraham's story makes clear. When we meet Abraham in today's passage, he's about had it. He can no longer contain his doubt, so he blurts out: "What will you give me, [God]?" *Where are these kids you promised?* Abraham has left everything behind for the promise, and still has nothing to show for it. His hope has worn thin; his fear and frustrations have multiplied. He hurls his anguished words into the night: "How will I know?" *How will I know that this promise is real?*

So the Lord gives him a sign. "Look toward heaven," God says. "Count the stars, if you are able ... so shall your descendants be." Count the stars ... these are your sign.

And then God seals the promise with a ceremony that seems a bit odd to modern readers. If you're still wondering about those carcasses: this ritual was common practice in ancient Israel. This was how people formalized a relationship – by cutting animals in two, and then passing between the pieces. It was a way of saying, *May the same happen to you if you break this covenant.* Yes, it seems odd to us, but it demonstrates God's faithfulness. When the Lord passes through those pieces, in the form of fire pot and flaming torch, God shows a commitment to the promise. God reassures Abraham that – one day – his descendants *will* be as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will bear the divine blessing to the world.

After that night, Abraham surely could not have gazed at the night sky without remembering God's word: "So shall your descendants be." How many times did Abraham step outside his tent on a clear night and gaze heavenward, looking to the stars for a sign of the promise? How many times did that sight sustain him, as he waited and waited for God to prove faithful?

Of course the Lord does prove faithful ... years after that night when God promised, "So shall your descendants be," Abraham finally held Isaac in his arms. And generations after that, God brought Abraham's descendants into the Land of Promise, a land flowing with milk and honey. And throughout time, God has worked through the chosen people to bear the blessing to the world. *We* are part of this promise, along with all the other children of Abraham – now as numerous as the stars of heaven.

And part of the blessing we bear is to point people to the promises of God – to be like the stars of heaven shining in the darkness ... to be witnesses to God's faithfulness, particularly when hope has worn thin.

Sometimes the simplest things make the most profound difference. There's a boy I met during my ministry in Southwest Philadelphia. Marcus, we'll call him, was a student in the church's after school program. And, like many children in that neighborhood, he had learned too soon about life's challenges. Marcus' mother struggled to make ends meet, so there often wasn't enough food on the table. Many afternoons, he would come into the church and head straight for the refrigerator to see which leftovers were fair game. At ten-years-old, he had already seen the devastating effects of drugs and crime on a community; he had lost his aunt to a drug overdose, and would tell of hearing gunshots on his street after dark. With so many challenges, he had trouble focusing in school, and still struggled to read the simplest words. Marcus was a child who had every reason to doubt the faithfulness of God, and you certainly would not find him outside at night gazing up at the stars.

But when he came to church, Marcus found people who pointed him to the promises of God. He found Ashley – the After School Coordinator – who took him under her wing and went out of her way to support him. And he found Beth, who sat with him during homework time, helping him sound out letters until he could make sense of the words. And he found Bill, who taught him photography and watched his excitement grow as he saw the world through a camera. And he found Jim, who sat with him during worship and taught him how to collect the offering. At church, Marcus found people who shone like the stars of heaven, bearing witness to God's faithfulness by showing him that he was a beloved child of God. And, over time, you could see Marcus begin to cling to God's promise for himself ...

Who are the people who have pointed you toward the promise when you wondered if you mattered, when you watched and waited for a sign of God's faithfulness? Or, when have you shared the light of love with someone who was shadowed by despair and ready to give up on God altogether? It doesn't take a blaze of glory to be a blessing ... sometimes it's as simple as showing up and showing care.

With God at work in us, we are stars shining for each other and for the world, pointing toward the promises of God. Our lives reflect the blessing we know and the blessing God intends for sisters and brothers near and far ... so look up, and look around, and count the stars – if you are able. See and believe the wonder of God's goodness: there are far too many stars to count.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Weaver of the worlds and Spinner of the stars, when we come to you in prayer our first word is gratefulness. We are deeply thankful for your precious gift of life, for the beauty of the earth and the wonders of the universe, for the wisdom of Scripture, for time to build friendships, and for the challenges to spread your kingdom of peace.

Gracious God, we want our spiritual life to flourish and we seek to pursue the extraordinary adventure you urge us to live. Give us the determination to embark on the parts of the gospel we often avoid, but which could instill in us a greater purpose and inject us with joy:

to forgive those who have wronged us,
to master our wealth and not to be mastered by it,
to share the burden of those who grieve,
to act with humility;
to visit those who long for human companionship,
to nurture a generous spirit.

Loving God, there are some within our church family who are experiencing extremely trying times. Storms have struck, their lives are in upheaval and the future looks very frightening. Life has completely lost all luster, their dreams have evaporated, and you seem so very far away.

God of compassion, Fellow Sufferer who feels the pain of the world, grant them

courage to face their fears,
strength to endure their trials,
and the will to fight against the darkness.

As they trudge through desolate valleys that threaten to swallow them, give them eyes to see the stars that still shine above the mountains and the certain knowledge that you are before, behind, beside, and within them. You surround them even when they cannot sense your presence and feel absolutely deserted. Help them to trust this truth.

God, we also pray that we may find ways to diffuse the anger, and to address the vulgar and hate-filled speech that is flooding the current political debate. People can disagree without being vindictive. We pray that people will reward civility more than tantrums and seek the common good rather than divisiveness. We are worn out by the oversupply of horrible news that is hyped by the media. Help us to seek truth rather than sensationalism.

Everlasting God, help all of us to tune our ears to your whispers in our soul and deepen our trust in your guidance so that we may pursue the friendship, satisfy the need, heal the wound and lift the spirit of someone in need. Grant us the courage to risk embarking on the adventure you yearn for us to take.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, “Our Father...